

CIA Chief's surprise exit

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From Rupert Cornwell in Washington

IN A MOVE that took Washington by surprise, Mr William Webster is to step down later this month as director of the CIA, after four years in the post stamped above all by a gradual rehabilitation of the frequently tarnished image of the United States' main intelligence-gathering institution.

News of his departure came at a quickly scheduled White House press conference yesterday, at which a clearly regretful President Bush declared that the 66-year-old Mr Webster, from 1978 to 1987 in charge of the FBI, had only informed him of his intentions on Tuesday evening.

"I hate to see him go," said Mr Bush, praising Mr Webster for his "integrity, effectiveness and in-

sight" and his contribution to the "professionalism" at the CIA. In reply, Mr Webster spoke of his own mixed feelings at leaving the job but, after 20 years of top-level government service, "something tells you it's a good time to go".

Despite the eternal temptation to take nothing relating to the CIA at face value, the initial reaction of close students of the agency was to do precisely that.

During his four years at Langley, Mr Webster has seen to it that the CIA kept a relatively low profile, following the instructions of Mr Bush when he took office in 1989 that the agency concentrate "on intelligence and not on policy matters". For that reason, Mr Webster did not have to face cabi-

net status. Nor was he a member of the group of top officials who charted US policy in the Gulf war.

His exclusion helped fuel some criticism of the CIA's intelligence performance during the war. In fact, however, the crucial mistake — the wrong reading of Saddam Hussein's intentions immediately before 2 August last year — was made not by the CIA, which warned invasion was virtually certain, but by the State Department.

And Mr Bush, himself the director of the CIA in 1976-77, would have none of such charges yesterday. "We all got criticism early on. CIA got a little. Defence

Department got a little." But, he insisted, the outcome of the war showed that intelligence had been "superb". The CIA had performed "fantastically".

According to Mr Bush, no successor to Mr Webster has been decided, and one is not likely to be named until shortly before the latter's four-year spell ends on 26 May. But two possible front-runners being mentioned yesterday were Robert Gates, Mr Bush's deputy national security adviser, with a long career in the CIA before that, and James Lilley, the US ambassador to China, an old personal friend of the President.

If anything, caution has been the hallmark of the Webster years, after the embarrassments that occurred under his predecessor, the late Mr William Casey, which culminated in the Iran-Contra affair.

At the CIA Mr Webster managed to avoid most pitfalls. He was especially wary of the covert activities that had caused such problems in the past.

The agency's handling of the political tumult that spread throughout Eastern Europe has also been generally regarded as competent. "Webster's record was not dramatically good, but there were no major foul-ups," said one specialist on the agency yesterday.

Mr Webster's future will probably involve a return to the legal

sector, where his career began.

A formal investigation into the allegation that the Reagan campaign team conspired to delay the release of US hostages in Iran in order to win the 1980 election moved closer yesterday, when President Bush indicated that he would not oppose an inquiry, writes Edward Lucas.

"Some Democratic members are looking at it right now, and that's fine. They can do whatever they want," he said. Perhaps more significantly, he also distanced himself from the actual allegations. "All I can speak for is my own participation or lack thereof," he said. "The allegations about me are grossly untrue, factually incorrect, bald-faced lies."